



State of Tennessee
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Tennessee State Library and Archives

Lt. Col. William K. M. Breckenridge
Civil War Daybook, 1862-1863

COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:

Breckenridge, William K. M.

Inclusive Dates:

1862-1863

Scope & Content:

One-volume daybook kept by an officer in the 1st West Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, later consolidated with the 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, U.S.A. The name that appears most often in the copies of letters and regimental and general orders is that of Lt. Col. William K. M. Breckenridge. *Tennesseans in the Civil War* (1965) lists him as a field & staff officer of Headquarters, 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment.

The daybook entries commence March 31, 1863, and end October 11, 1863. The log opens with a 13-stanza, pro-Union poem “composed and ritten by the Reverent [Enos?] Guinn of Tennessee.” The seventh verse anticipates the arrival of Union soldiers saving the South:

A heavenly breeze blew oer the plain
Whitch roused Collumbia’s sons again
From Northern lands and plains we came
The land of liberty to gain.

Complementing the orders and registered letters are daily summaries of regimental and company activities. Seven registered letters are dated 1862, while all other items are dated 1863. Pages 1-147 and 149-154 are missing. The last entry is on page 229. For historical accuracy and flavor, direct quotes in this finding aid have not been edited.

The volume contains three distinct sets of handwriting. From the signatures and content of the entries, it is presumed that Breckenridge is the main author. Some writing is careless and difficult to read; those entries are complicated by misspellings and poor syntax, grammar, and punctuation. On July 13, for example, one writer complains that he could “hir preachen and praying, vulgar songs, card players swaring about there games fidling and dancing and a [illegible] with a capt. of our Command and a sargent a bout a hore that the sergt brought into camp and the cpt. wants to take hir himself....”

Despite the penmanship, the authors compiled an animated record of life in a Union cavalry unit moving around West Tennessee. Towns most often mentioned are Bolivar, Grand Junction, Jackson, LaGrange, and Memphis. In addition to engaging in skirmishes with the “Rebbels,” the writers record observations of everyday life including scouting missions, weather, policing the parade ground and picket lines, drilling, foraging, cleaning guns and sabers, and “nothing of mutch importance.”

Most of the regimental and special orders are posted from Bolivar, and it is unclear who penned them. They are difficult to read, and most are attributed to “Wm. K. M. Breckenridge.” It is possible he dictated the orders to a secretary. The entries of June 19 and after are written in a much more legible hand.

One of the first orders was to arrest Thomas Walker, take his sword, and confine him to camp. Another directed unmarried “negro women out of camp at once.” The special order of March 29, 1863, called for Breckenridge’s arrest.

Breckenridge had an uneasy relationship with his commanding officer, Col. Fielding Hurst, but tried to make the best of it. At one point, the lieutenant colonel was passed over for a commission and complained that he had done most of the scouting and “kept the men together and done all I can for them and now [Hurst] treats me with contempt. he has tried to arrest me several times....” (The commander eventually succeeded in arresting him for disobedience.) On July 26, Breckenridge returned to camp at LaGrange to learn that his nemesis had been captured, and requested to send out a party to recapture him. The next day, it was falsely reported that Hurst had been killed. In reading the entry, one could infer that it was indeed Breckenridge’s men who brought Hurst safely back to camp.

Throughout the daybook, Breckenridge reports guerrilla activity in West Tennessee. These roughnecks plundered the countryside robbing and murdering citizens. In August, Breckenridge secured a boarding house in LaGrange for a group of ladies fleeing guerrillas who had stolen everything they owned.

Breckenridge’s men were often without supplies such as weapons, horses, and saddles, and went long stretches without pay. On April 30, he went to Col. Hurst about the pay situation, and boasted in his journal that Gens. Dodge, Brayman, and Lawler “all say that me and my men air the most efficient men that is hir.”

The obvious implication was that his soldiers deserved to be paid on time. In June, Breckenridge wrote, "Though I am expecting pay for my men in a few days If I should not get it soon will steal it from citizens."

More serious matters were in store. In a letter to (Federal) Headquarters, Department of West Tennessee and North Mississippi, Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest labeled Hurst and his men "outlaws" for reasons including murder, extortion, torture, robbery, and the torching of homes. In April 1863, Breckenridge records an event in which Hurst had once again gone to Purdy to burn houses.

That June, Maj. William J. Smith raised a detail to go into the country to take \$60 worth of property from each citizen until they collected \$1800 to pay him for what "Sol. Street took from him." The next day, Breckenridge disdainfully wrote that a wagon rolled into camp loaded with house furniture, clothing, and a fine piano stolen from an old lady in the country and put in Maj. Smith's house. The day after that, Col. Hurst ordered several men tied to an apple tree because they would not participate in stealing from the locals. Though Breckenridge wrote that the whole regiment was in an uproar about the thieving, it continued. At one point, the 2nd Iowa and 7th Illinois cavalries returned to camp with a tidy amount of stolen property and a "fine drove of cattle they got from the Guerrillers."

In mid-July, the regiment attacked a 2500-strong Confederate force at Jackson. After a 2½-hour engagement, the Rebels ran, the Yanks in hot pursuit but were ordered back to hold the town. The encounter resulted in the capture of two companies and about 300 stands of arms. Breckenridge proudly wrote that they routed the "Rebs" wherever they met them.

In the aftermath, however, the wholesale looting of Jackson was reported, whiskey being a contributing factor. Breckenridge stated that he tried to stop the plunder and blamed the drunkenness on a Michigan regiment. In a September 28 registered report recorded in his daybook, he witnessed all regiments participating in the pillage of Jackson: "...when Col. Hatch returned to town the men broak open houses and takin all tha wanted and took buggies and wagons and loaded them with goods and [illegible] and so foarth I stand in the court house yard and saw a portion of command pass and nearly eavery man had sumpthing that had been taken out of the place."

In late May, the lieutenant colonel signed a report noting that the men had skirmished with Confederates and taken two prisoners and horses. Dodging the enemy while trying to take leather to a tannery, he mentioned t "300 rebbels camp't" up the creek, and the number had grown to 800 the next day. His men having eaten only five meals of bacon and cornbread between Sunday and Thursday, Breckenridge wisely retreated to the Tennessee River where they had breakfast at the gunboats. Soon after, they struck out for LaGrange, where they

captured horses, mules, a “yoak” of cattle, 26 wagon loads of leather, and 31 conscripts who were administered the oath.

Breckenridge did not often grumble about his health, but in June he wrote that he suffered more than he had in his life with piles. It was in this entry that he complained about the “hoses” in camp. The next day, he reported that “the hoses or at least all the white hoses have left camp tho there is sum negroes in the camp and white men and officers keep them publickly.”

There were happier moments in service, and morale was usually good. July 4, 1863, was a grand day for the regiment. They were “all set free from duty to day because this is the day our independence was gained by Washington the soldiers were march out in line with the artillery. and thirty four shots were fired with the cannons, one shot for each state in the union. And then the men rallied round the flag and gave three cheers for the union and the stripes and stars....” Breckenridge was not so pleased later that month when a sutler brought whiskey into camp, and “several of the boy got tight.”

In mid-August, he organized a dress parade, and “the men all turned out and if we all had arms we could make the Rebs get out of our Country in Double Quick.” After a sharp skirmish in Salem in October, the men “seemed merry and willing to fight” and die for their country. Some of the wounded rallied from their sick beds to leave camp with the others.

Perhaps the most poignant entry in the journal is the copy of a letter dated May 31, 1863, at Decaturville. It is from a Mrs. M. E. Scott to her husband, a Confederate soldier on his way to a Northern prison. She had just missed his departure, and he was “far down the [Tennessee] river” when Breckenridge’s men arrived with her at the send-off point. Mrs. Scott describes the troopers as “perfect gentlemen.” She expresses understanding of the trials of a soldier’s life, but encourages her husband to resist temptation. Scott also advises him to take the oath. She goes on, hoping that

God’s Peace will spread her wings over our once happy and prosperous country.... Oh that the leaders of this horrid war would look to their country’s good instead of pursuing the Glittering bubble of Fame.... but let them have one look at the battle Field where death may be seen in its most shocking and revolting form, where nought is heard, but the shreiks of the wounded and dying. The bubbling groans as the blood oozes from the death wound and the mournful wailling note of pain. what kind of pain Such as is caused by armes torn from their sockets, eyes put out by the bayonets thrust hearts torn from yet living bodies and the wounded trampled beneath the iron shod hoofs of the war horse....

The registered letters and reports should be of special interest to students and scholars of the Civil War. They address encounters with guerrillas, tension between officers, the effects of drinking, and mention a dust-up Breckenridge and his men had with Gen. Forrest. Letters and reports are dated from Bolivar, "Soltillow" [Saltillo], Jackson, and Washington, D. C.

The daily entries contain valuable information about intra-regimental relationships, guerrilla warfare and its effect on local populations, behavior in wartime, and the frustration of dealing with a military bureaucracy.

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Administrative/Biographical History

The Lt. Col. William K. M. Breckenridge who is thought to be the daybook's chief author was from Wayne County, Tennessee. This is according to an 1863 registered report to military governor Andrew Johnson from Col. Fielding Hurst praising Breckenridge's integrity and patriotism. However, no evidence of Breckenridge's residency in Tennessee could be found in the 1860 federal census.

In October 1862, four companies were raised from Weakley and Gibson counties and mustered in as the 1st West Tennessee Cavalry. In July 1863, the men were transferred to the 6th Tennessee Cavalry, U.S.A. Both were commanded by Col. Fielding Hurst, who earned a reputation as a tyrant among Confederate sympathizers in West Tennessee. According to *Tennesseans in the Civil War* (1965), Hurst was ordered to "grub up" West Tennessee to restore order. In May 1864, he was accused by his own army of murdering several Confederate prisoners.

The regiment engaged the enemy in skirmishes throughout West Tennessee and participated in only one major fight, the Battle of Nashville (December 15-16, 1864). Its contribution must have been minimal since no men were lost. The 6th Tennessee Cavalry mustered out of service at Pulaski, Giles County, in July 1865.

Organization/Arrangement of Materials

Volume's contents are mainly chronological

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Index Terms

Personal Names:

Brayman, Mason, 1813-1895
Dodge, Grenville Mellen, 1831-1916
Forrest, Nathan Bedford, 1821-1877
Guinn, [Enos?]
Hurst, Fielding, 1818-1882
Lawler, Michael Kelly, 1814-1882
Scott, M. E.
Smith, William J., fl. 1862-1863

Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:

United States. Army -- Military life
United States. Army. Iowa Cavalry Regiment, 2nd
United States. Army. Illinois Cavalry Regiment, 7th
United States. Army. Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, 6th
United States. Army. West Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, 1st

Subjects:

Guerrillas -- Tennessee
Military occupation -- Tennessee

Geographic Names:

Bolivar (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Decaturville (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Grand Junction (Tenn.) -- History, Civil War, 1861-1865
Jackson (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
LaGrange (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Memphis (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Purdy (Tenn.) History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Salem (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Saltillo (Tenn.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Tennessee River -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Washington (D. C.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

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DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

CONTAINER LIST

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